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# THE SCHOOL REVIEW

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## THE INTERIOR DECORATION OF SCHOOLS

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Our graded school requires of its pupils a classroom attendance of eight thousand hours. This is a heavy tribute to levy upon the period of childhood, and it may well purchase other things for the pupil than an acquisition merely of those weapons of traffic dear to the utilitarian's heart—the so-called rudiments. It is the present purpose to discuss some of those silent influences which, without interference with the traditional purposes of the school, make for a richer childhood and a better community.

The first of these concerns the color effects of the classroom. When a competent architect plans a schoolhouse, he presumes of course that, given due time for drying out, the plaster walls will be appropriately tinted or papered, and in such tones as will give a harmonious color unity to the whole room. It is noticeable, however, that in the average American schoolhouse this ideal is seldom consummated. We rush our furnishings in, and the painters and plasterers have hardly packed up their tools before the classes are settled in an established school routine. And as for those glaring white walls, we “first endure, then pity, then embrace,” finally forgetting that the plan was ever otherwise.

There are reasons, however, beyond a mere aesthetic preference, why the schoolroom walls should not be left white. It is the common testimony of physicians that the glaring whitewash intensifies nervous

afflictions and injures the eyes. Many a mother diagnoses her girl's nervous headache as a case of overstudy, when it is in reality a product of five hours' exposure to the harsh, blinding glare of the school-room walls. And many a boy is condemned as a wickedly disposed nuisance, when he merely exhibits a nervous irritation which a proper color scheme will abate. A well-known Massachusetts physician, Dr. Myles Standish, of Boston, says:

I have often seen children immediately and permanently recover from a persistent recurring diseased condition of the eyes when removed from a school-room with white walls, and sent elsewhere to school or kept at home, where the walls are tinted. The principal color of the walls should be of an even tone, so that the amount of light reflected will be the same from all parts of the surface, as waving or clouded effects are very trying to sensitive eyes. Any color may be placed in its proper position with regard to its safety for schoolroom walls by remembering the general rule with regard to the sensitiveness of the eye to the colors of the spectrum, which is, that the nearer the color is to the red end of the spectrum, the more irritating it is to the eyes; and the nearer the color is to the blue end of the spectrum, the easier it is to the eyes, with the single exception that the extreme violet rays also are irritating.

From this it will be seen that red and all its derivatives should be rigidly excluded, and orange also is nearly as bad, while yellow should never be taken by preference. Greens and blues are absolutely safe colors, and it is not at all necessary that the colors should be pronounced; the depth of the color should be made dependent upon the amount of light coming in at the windows, and upon its quality, as, for instance, whether the windows have a northern or southern exposure, whether the sun's rays can come directly into the room when the sun sinks low in the heavens in the middle of a winter afternoon, and other surrounding circumstances of each individual room.

The color of the ceiling of a schoolroom is fully as important as the color of the walls, particularly when there is any amount of reflected light.

All I have said with regard to the color of the walls is doubly true when applied to the window shades, and this fact should always be taken into consideration in furnishing and decorating a schoolroom.

Medical science is constantly finding new and positive evidence of the pathological effects of color. And it rests with any of us to make simple experiments which will show conclusively the influence of color upon the emotions. Look through a blue glass, and we see a sad, unhopeful prospect, in the midst of which only the utmost exertion of will-power can sustain a cheerful mood. Look through a red glass, and the reverse feeling is aroused. The outlook is one of

exaggerated sunshine, which stimulates the imagination, induces a sanguine mood, and suggests action. The blue-glass craze of the seventies was an incident which foreshadowed the wide employment of color as a remedial agent.

We are thus in possession of a more or less definite knowledge of the pathology of color. We know that red is stimulating, irritating, unrestful. We know that blue is quieting, but also depressing. Since the pupil of the elementary school spends eight thousand hours in actual attendance in the classroom, it is of the highest importance to give him a color environment which will not, on the one hand, be a source of depression and melancholy, nor, on the other, an agent of excessive nervous stimulation.

We have such a color in green of the quieter sort. There is a whole gamut of greens, running from light apple down through the stone-greens, or "dried pea," to the deep, rich olives. This series is perfectly adapted to the requirements of interior tinting, either for home or for school. The distinction is often made between a north and south room, reddish buffs and terra-cottas being recommended for the former. This distinction is not vital, however, and we always approach the danger line as we move toward the red end of the spectrum. One of the most delightful school buildings it has been my good fortune to visit is tinted throughout, north and south rooms alike, in low stone-green. Another building in the same city is tinted in blue (!)—the relic of a former régime—and the effect is so depressing that one experiences a sensible feeling of relief and renewed joy on once more regaining the outer air.

A combination beyond further desire is to be had by coloring the wainscoting and woodwork a deep olive, the walls up to the molding a middling sage-green, and, above that, the walls and ceiling a lighter and neutral stone-green; this combination, of course, with the real slate board. It goes without saying that this coloring shall be "dull finish."

A striking fact is to be noted just here. The blackboard, the recipient of endless obloquy at the hands of the aesthetic, ceases to offend where the walls are rightly tinted. Indeed, real slate "blackboard" is never black at all, but a pleasing, quiet gray that has no quarrels. It is only a glaring white wall that thrusts the blackboard

into undue prominence, and thus makes it a scapegoat for a fault not its own. Speaking of blackboards, the various experiments in tinting the board have proved anything but satisfactory. The logical and satisfactory combination is a tinted wall and a board of natural slate-gray. A room thus finished is fundamentally beautiful, and is not in urgent need of any further decoration. Speaking generally, we may say that a room properly tinted is nine-tenths decorated.

I remember one school particularly, in Andover, when George E. Johnson was in charge. It had not exactly the "dim religious light," but a quality of air and color which one's home has, if he has a home. Its rooms were as cool as the aisles of the woods, and as mellow; rooms that seemed to have, in themselves, a personality, and to be sociable when empty. I used to think that not even a Jukes would play truant from such a school as that; and that no teacher, be she ever so mediocre, could quite annul the beneficence to the pupil of such a surrounding.

Regrettably, in the much-discussed topic of school decoration, this matter of wall-tinting has been rather slighted, the emphasis falling more upon pictures. This is partly due to the mad over-production of the penny prints. With many a teacher the problem of wall decoration seems to lie in how many penny pictures she can arrange on her white plaster wall, in friezes and borders, diamonds and circles. There is a principle in composition, very easily understood, which will serve us as a guide upon this point. It is that an aggregation of small, unrelated spots is distressful to the eye and scattering to the attention. It would be disastrous to one's equanimity to try to listen to a score of people, all shouting at once messages of unlike import. The nerve-racking effect of such a babel is precisely comparable to that produced by a motley collection of picture spots, scattered over the wall in a "promiscuous arrangement," as an old textbook writer used to say. In composing his picture, an artist is governed by certain principles of composition, the chief of which is what Ruskin calls "principality," whereby all the elements of the sketch fall into an obedient relation to one dominant feature. The minor color spots in the composition do not exist for and in themselves, but rather as organic parts of the entire sketch. In a very rough and general way, we are to con-

ceive our wall just as the artist does his sketch, and every picture that goes upon it is to be subordinated in an arrangement having in view the appearance of the entire wall.

The first step in this direction is to gather up most of the small pictures and set them together in panels of two or three, instead of hanging them singly, each competing with all the rest. Three penny prints which are merely a vexation to the spirit when pinned up separately, become a genuine contribution to the decorative scheme of the room when they are grouped upon a single panel of mounting-board, first having their margins cut away.<sup>1</sup> And even in the grouping of these separate pieces on their mount we are yet answerable to the laws of composition. The intervals between the pictures must be less than the margins around them. Otherwise a centrifugal effect is had, and that is weak composition.

If now we have two or three panels of the sort just described, together with a larger print or two of a kind referred to later, we have ample material for our wall decoration. By all means refrain from overcrowding your walls. Remember that, while in a salon exhibit the problem is to get all the pictures up, ours is a distinctly different one. It is to regard our wall as a unit, whose hangings must only confirm its unity. And let us rid ourselves, at the outset, of the prevailing didactical idea that we are "decorating" for the purpose of instruction. Nothing can be more ruinous to the decorative scheme than to start out with this purpose uppermost. The underlying need is that the pictorial embellishment of the wall shall present a few simple and well-asserted claims upon our attention, rather than many and divergent ones. A scattered rabble of small claimants results in a dissipated attention, and this means nervous headaches and kindred things. It is a common experience to leave an art gallery with a backache or headache, or both; associated with aching feet and a general nervous depression. And this condition is not a mere physical fatigue resultant upon walking, but a nerve exhaustion following upon a sustained attention to a great number of hangings, diverse in size, shape, color, and subject, and having no mutual reference.

<sup>1</sup> For these mounts a material called "cover paper" is to be had at the wholesale paper houses. It costs about two cents a sheet (22×28), and, offering every variety of delicate gray, neutral green, etc., is both cheaper and better than the regular mounting-board.

The subject of frames is not so easily traversed. We may say, however, that, for school purposes at least, it is safest to avoid gaudy and heavily gilded frames. The small passepartout framing is all that is needed for prints and for most small color pieces. And there is the argument for economy in its favor in that it may easily be done by the teacher herself, or by the more skilful pupils.

As to frames and mats in general, it is well to remember, with Ruskin, that the frame is "a little space of silence"—between the picture and the wall behind it. Where the wall presents one uniform tint it is not really so necessary that the frame should be neutral and "silent" as in cases where patterned wall-paper is used. But the general rule is to be held in mind that the frame is subservient to its picture and should not be too clamorous in its own right. Those ornate golden halos that are given away with pounds of tea are by all means to be avoided. The frame, in all ordinary cases (such as ours), should be exceedingly quiet and say little for itself, remembering that it is but a frame, after all.

We are now confronted with the problem of the selection of our pictures. First of all we perceive the danger of hanging colored chromos, or paintings. Because only cheap ones are within our means, they are tolerably certain to be bad. And, good or bad, their color schemes will more likely than not quarrel viciously with our wall tint. Thus limiting ourselves mainly to black and white, we may go a step farther and say: Throw out the half-tones, as far as we can afford. A half-tone is the style of print seen in the penny pictures and in most of the ten-cent magazines. It is just what its name implies—it is a print that has lost half of its tone, or virility of light and dark, in the process of reproduction. Examine any penny print under a hand-glass, and we perceive it to be cut up into microscopic dots. Compare it now with an etching, a photogravure, or a pen-and-ink, and this loss of tone is instantly appreciated.

Fortunately there are better things within the reach of the poorest of us. Most of the big art publishers issue, under various names, photogravure-like prints of the world's finest pictures. These are large, fine productions, generally on plates 22×28 inches, and they have all the depth and richness of tone of the photogravure. They are had in either black or sepia at the remarkably low price of fifty

cents apiece. Such a picture, with its white border cut away and suitably matted, even in passepartout, is good hanging for the king's audience chamber. The generous size of these productions makes them especially appropriate for the schoolroom wall. One or two such pieces, well selected as to subject and reinforced by half a dozen smaller things, etchings or pen-and-ink drawings preferably, are enough for any classroom. By all means avoid overloading your wall and making the onlooker strabismic with a motley display.

But the most important consideration of all is as to the subjects we select. Let us avoid reading our own preferences too unreservedly into the children, and becoming their self-appointed proxies. The children have not that sense of historical values which is always in danger of giving their seniors a bias. We have not quite learned to distinguish between that which is imposing, from the art curator's standpoint, and that which is inherently beautiful, regardless of its niche in the lore of art. It is one thing to stock a museum of art with the conspicuous milestones of art history. It is quite another to decorate a children's room with things intrinsically beautiful—and beautiful *from the child's view-point*. Imagine, for instance, dutifully hanging "Mona Lisa" in a grade-room, simply because Leonardo did it! The pedagogical rush for Italian women, particularly madonnas, has developed into a craze, on the perfectly logical basis that the mother-and-child sentiment is appropriate to our purpose. We have merely been guilty of a little oversight in not directly perceiving that the mature and more or less ascetic conceptions of the Renaissance Italians, catering directly to the churchly ideals of that period, are not very well calculated to provide acceptable mamma pictures for twentieth-century American babies. A sentiment of mother-love—yes, but it must be a mother-love that he can recognize. He draws a keen line between sanctity in a niche and a genuine, unposeful motherhood. And so I say again, if our purpose is decorative rather than didactic, let us gather intrinsic, and, if necessary, unsigned, beauty, rather than the mélange of the art museum.

Then again, the masters, who spoke first of all in color cannot be represented in the remotest degree by printer's ink—particularly in the half-tone; and all this bowing and scraping before "penny prints



of the masters" is about as near the real spirit of art as idol-worship is to genuine religion. Supervisors of art and students of any sort who address themselves to the educational problem are fearfully apt to mix up their academic acquirements with their native appreciation until they mistake one for the other, and so disqualify themselves for the work in hand. A while ago an inquiry was sent to several dozen artists, teachers, presidents of civic clubs, etc.—men and women who presumably had the matter most at heart—as to what pictures they would recommend for school decoration. The answers, invariably cordial and enthusiastic, almost with one voice placed the "Sistine Madonna" at the head of the list! No stronger evidence could be presented of the incubus of hopelessly academic bias under which the subject rests. "The best in art is none too good for the children," wrote Dr. Klemm. While everybody must agree heartily with this sentiment, what a curious miscarriage of ideas it is to set up the subjective and subtle as the one antithesis to the mediocre! Mr. Vickery, of San Francisco, sounded a hopeful note in declaring that "a good poster is infinitely better than a mediocre engraving." Ellen Gates Starr said: "Almost anything of Millet's is good;" and then, endorsing the mother-and-child sentiment for primary rooms, she shortly mentioned Millet's "First Step," where others had chosen the "Sistine Madonna."

If we must have madonnas, why may we not take those three or four in which the mothers are in love with their babies and the babies themselves are kissable? Name over Feruzzi, Murillo (that one in the Pitti Gallery), Froschl, and, above them all, Courtois, and, I take it, we have about finished the list. And yet, of these incomparable painters of mother and child, three out of the four are unheard of in the levels where they would win their deserved appreciation if introduced. Add St. Anthony, with his strong natural appeal to adults and children alike, and the rest of our wall we need for less exalted subjects.

If we can once bolster up our common-sense with enough moral courage to leave off this indiscriminate goose-marching after madonnas, even the penny prints, which have come in for such ill-usage in this writing, will have their uses. Just think of Millet, Breton, and Dupré, with their fine realities; Adan and Meyer von Bremen,

with their rollicking German sunshine, a ten minutes' bath in which is as good as a day in the country; Sir John Millais and Sir Joshua Reynolds with their galaxy of matchless little maids; and finally Jacques with his sheep, and Barber, Carter, and Adam with their household pets. Think of this diverse and all-satisfying company being put out of countenance and being thrust against the wall, so to speak, by an undifferentiated group of pallid and poseful madonnas, scarce a quartet of whom could either love or be loved, by the most amiable stretch of the imagination! Rather let us be at once exoteric and generous, and give the madonnas over to the sophisticated and tempered academician, to have and to hold for his very own.

Summarizing, let us leave out the mawkish pictures, on the one hand, and the too subtly religious ones, on the other, and make our choice among the sane, joyous, lovable things that are so readily to be had. The principles which nowadays guide us in the selection of children's literature have only to be applied in this question of children's art.

In every schoolroom there are jogs in the wall, narrow intervals between windows, etc., which are not adapted for the hanging of pictures, but are just right for the placing of plaster casts. Since these, even of the Della Robbia order (which have always been chosen with the madonnas), do not carry a particularly emotional significance, as do pictures, we shall have to base our selection upon somewhat different values. Their first utility is purely decorative, having in view the general scheme of the room; so that the shape, size, and general appearance of the piece have perhaps as much to do with our selection as the subject itself. The beautiful "Flying Mercury," for instance, is altogether too fragile to introduce into any schoolhouse. And any statuary for the classroom, however robust in its lines, should invariably be placed above the six-foot level. Busts of authors and statesmen are as suitable as any others, not with the idea that many children will exhibit an intelligent affection for them, but that they will pleasantly finish the appointments and the color scheme of the room. To do this these casts must, of course, have the ivory finish, which costs no more. Nothing (save a blue wall) is quite so persistently ugly as a plain plaster cast. Even the inevitable dust of seasons does not soften its harsh unfriendliness; and, on the

other hand, there are few color spots in the room more grateful to the eye than the embalmed sunshine of a bit of ivory-finished statuary.

Vying in importance with the pictures in the schoolroom are the plants. A sage-green room with a table full of growing things by the window is an abode of joy, pictures left out of the question. And the effect is greatly enhanced if there be, beside the plants, or embowered among them, a little aquarium with a goldfish dawdling in it.

A clever device for the purpose is in use in Stockton. The potted plants are set upon an ordinary cheap table, except that the top is zinc-lined and sunk in for an inch; or, in other words, the edges of the top are raised that inch, making a shallow, zinc-lined trough. The flowers can thus be watered without any danger of leakage, or of unsightly, warped table-tops.

Draperies in the schoolroom—except window curtains, periodically washed—are universally condemned by all who have given the matter thought.

There is some diversity of opinion concerning animals in the schoolroom. Much is urged against caged life before the children. A correspondent covers the question thus: "I object to having animals confined for *entertainment* of young or old, at home or at school. But this allows us some latitude, inasmuch as we may have much animal life about which is not, in a strict sense, confined. It requires an overwrought imagination to commiserate a well-tended canary, for example." A letter on the subject refers pleasantly to "a tame, comfortable kind of animal, or goldfish in a globe, in which is a water plant growing." I knew one class in which a dog or two were in fairly good attendance. They were orderly in deportment, and gave silent and continuous approbation to the whole programme. True enough, the teacher, in her frequent rounds, had to step over an occasional barrier, but I do not recall any schoolroom, before or since, where the spirit was more homelike, wholesome, and perfectly conducive to study.